



## BREAKING THE BIAS AS AN ORGANIC FARMER

### PIONER IN ORGANIC FARMING LEADS WITH PASSION FOR HEALTHY LIFE

*“With USAID assistance the Lipa company and its organic products are increasingly more recognized both domestically and internationally and are expanding to new export markets in Europe”.*

Suzana Dimitrievska is an organic farmer from Mustafino, a village in the central part of North Macedonia. She began her professional journey 30 years ago when she graduated as a nurse from a medical high school. Although she was an excellent student and her dream was to become a doctor, her family did not have the financial means to support her through medical school. She then married, started a family, and made her first investment to purchase a piece of agricultural land. In the following three years, the family made additional purchases to expand their agricultural land to five acres. They grew tomatoes, sunflowers, corn, and watermelons, with most of the cultivation being done manually. It was hard and physically demanding work that Suzana did not enjoy at that time.



**Suzana Dimitrievska,**  
**owner of Lipa, an organic company**

*Photo credit: Tomislav Georgiev*

After a few years, Suzana opened a small shop in her village. For her, being a shopkeeper was an upgrade from being a farmer, which, at that point in her life, she saw as a lowly job. The income from the shop made it possible for her to enrol in college, and she graduated as a social worker in a record time. Although her diploma did not land her a suitable job, it was a great personal achievement for Suzana. Around that time, she became interested in healthy food and nutrition, a popular new trend. She could not understand what the fuss was all about, as all the food she knew, the food they produced and ate in the village, was organic. At first it was strange for her to realize that healthy and organic food was such a rarity; that most mass-produced food is laden with chemical fertilisers and pesticides. She recognized that organic means more healthy foods, which translates into more vibrant and healthy people.

Suzana became more actively engaged in her community, joining a women's organization in the nearby town and becoming interested in improving the environment. Then, Ovce Pole Eco Products, a newly established organization implementing organic agriculture initiatives, contacted her husband to ask if he would become involved. He declined the offer, but knowing how passionate she was about the need for organic practices, he extended this opportunity to Suzana. She eagerly took this opportunity and invested considerable time and energy in the development of the organization and promotion of organic products. This professional engagement provided opportunities for Suzana to further educate herself in organic agriculture production, deliver presentations, travel frequently out of the country, and learn from the best practices of other countries in the region and Europe.

In 2004, Suzana founded an organic produce company, Lipa, and applied for and received a lease from the government for 135 acres of land near her village. The land awarded was not of the highest quality, and her husband felt they should not take it. But Suzana considered it a challenge and signed the lease, determined to make the most of the land despite its poor quality. She worked hard to get the land certified for organic production and went further to implement the higher BIO Suisse standard. Looking for ways to organize the buy-out and sales of produce, Suzana and fellow farmers

from Kocani established the Demetra agriculture cooperative in 2006, focusing on buy-out of agriculture produce from 15 farmer-members. In 2015 Suzana once again took the initiative and established the new Eco-Ilinden Cooperative to comply with new government regulations. Although she had no previous experience in managing cooperatives, she quickly rose to the challenge and excelled in the role. In her professional capacity, she has adopted a consultative management style, which she applies at the cooperatives and associations she manages. Suzana is currently President of the Association of Agriculture Cooperatives of North Macedonia.

Over the years, Suzana applied all the knowledge, skills, and experience she gained from study visits in Europe to further develop Lipa as an organic company. In collaboration with the Swiss project Increasing Market Employability, she was able to identify foreign buyers for her organic produce, particularly her borlotti beans. She invested in new technology to make the production more viable given the climate specifics of the Ovce Pole valley.

Most recently, Lipa received assistance from the USAID Economic Development, Governance and Enterprise Growth project (EDGE), which works with innovative and forward-thinking fruits and vegetables (F&V) farmers such as Suzana to help them increase their competitiveness. Through this project, USAID assists them to gain new knowledge and adopt new technologies, production and management practices, and food safety standards. EDGE also organizes activities such as regional webinars on digitalization in agriculture and a regional conference on organic agriculture and has supported participation of F&V companies from Western Balkan countries in international fairs to enable them to learn about new trends, establish new business contacts, and conduct individual business-to-business meetings.

With this USAID assistance, Suzana received over 20 hours of one-on-one executive coaching, which resulted in a business growth plan, environmental audit, and a new [website](#) and a promotional [video](#). She improved Lipa's business operations, including a system for a digital marketing audit, digital visibility, and online marketing, and developed a path for future investments and growth. As a result, the Lipa company and its organic products are increasingly more recognized both domestically and internationally, and are expanding to new export markets in Europe.

Although not her preferred career path to begin with, after almost 30 years in the agriculture business, Suzana knows she made the right decision. Organic farming has opened many opportunities for her and she has become a real pioneer, leading the way to introduce more organic production in North Macedonia. Although organic agriculture requires constant investments to maintain the standards, Suzana considers it to be a profitable business and fulfilling vocation, and she believes that one of her two sons will continue with the organic farm business in the future.

Through Lipa as well as the two cooperatives, Suzana continues to inspire other farmers in the country, helping them to learn more about and make the transition from conventional to organic production, and to further encourage more healthy lifestyles.